The Right Place: How to Choose the Best School for Your Child - Hebrew Day School

Dr. Steven Lorch explains what distinguishes Jewish day schools from other private schools with an international reputation, and suggests to parents: "The place in which you feel at home is the school you should choose for your children's education."

In 2007, a study was published that found that graduates of Jewish day schools in America have a significant academic advantage in ability and achievement. This was well known years earlier; however, the study was an official confirmation that children who study in Jewish schools reach higher levels of achievement, and when they are in college, they have wider options than their peers who studied in non-Jewish schools.

When American Jewish or Israeli American parents are asked what is important to them in a school, how they choose a school for their children to go to, and whether Jewish Studies are a significant factor in their decision, many of them answer that they are interested in keeping the tradition, that their children should feel connected to their roots and their identity, but not necessarily that they should invest much time or effort in Jewish Studies classes.

Dr. Steven Lorch, who researched the topic in depth and also published a well-known article in 2008 that discusses these matters, says that this reflects thinking that is partial and not necessarily correct. Because this is a subject that concerns many parents, we decided to ask Lorch about the factors to consider when one is at a crossroads on the way to choosing a school for one's child.

Why Choose a Jewish Education?

"Many parents think about the Jewish and identity-related advantages for their child. They want their child to continue to be a Jew, to be loyal to family traditions, and even to be able to communicate with family members who live in Israel. In effect, they measure all these desires against the benefits of non-Jewish schools.

"Parents don't factor in the academic advantages of Jewish education over non-Jewish education, and this is the root of the problem. If one thinks about all the benefits of a Jewish school, it will be clear that it is superior to public or private schools on every academic and community dimension."

The Relational Benefit

"One of the factors that is considered a predictor of success in education and in life is a school's community character. To be part of a supportive, embracing community is an important feature that influences the ability of a child. In the psychological literature, this is called a sense of belonging, and it is strongly present in Jewish schools, but not necessarily true of non-Jewish schools. In reality, this is the first advantage that Jewish schools have that parents tend to ignore."

Dr. Lorch, who received his master's degree in education from Harvard and his doctorate in religion and education from Columbia, and is an ordained rabbi, is a recognized authority on education and Jewish education. Lorch is currently the head of Kadima Day School in Los Angeles. He came to Kadima after 40 years of heading schools in Israel and America, having arrived in the summer of 2018 from New York on account of the rich community that the school offers and the values that he is developing.

When he recalls the many parents he has spoken with over the years who struggled with the question of Jewish education, he says that many think that they are paying a price in other realms for the sake of the Jewish aspect. "From their perspective, they want Judaism enough that they are prepared to compromise. This is an error. No compromise is needed; rather, there is an advantage in every respect."

"If we take into account not only the Jewish aspect, but also the values-based, community-oriented, relational, and academic dimensions - the Jewish school is superior in all of them. This is the right way of thinking, which will lead the ambivalent Jewish parent to the right school for his or her child."

Dr. Lorch speaks from his rich experience, and in the aftermath of one school visit that took place 12 years ago, in the 2000s, when he served as the chairperson of a school accreditation team, that helped him understand with utmost clarity the importance and advantage of Jewish education.

The members of accreditation teams would visit many different schools and be hosted by them for several days, and at the end of their visits would write reports on the schools' progress based on their achievements. In this connection, Lorch and 12 fellow teachers and administrators, the members of the team, were hosted by a Jewish school in New Jersey.

"I had a powerful experience," he recalled. "I sat with my fellow team members, nearly all of them from famous, well-reputed non-Jewish independent schools in the area. Something happened that I hadn't expected. They commended the Jewish school in New Jersey for its successes, not just in the Jewish realm, but also in its values education, community spirit, academic preparation, and its students' future life chances."

The strong and surprising statements that he heard made him proud but also aroused his curiosity. "I felt proud to be a Jewish educator, but in my capacity as chairperson of the team I had to suppress this feeling and focus my professional curiosity." He started to research the matter in depth. "I tried to inquire into each of these interesting statements. I examined the findings, the studies that had been published about each domain or topic. I reached several conclusions that can be divided into three key features that can perhaps shed light and explain the claims of the team members."

Academic Advantages

"In Jewish schools, students learn approximately twice as many academic subjects as students from other schools. Alongside the range of subjects studied in every school in America: language arts, history, science, math, and a foreign language, students learn a complete second range of subjects: Bible, Rabbinic literature, Jewish history, Jewish thought, and even law - a subject that is taught in America as a post-bachelor's program is studied in Jewish schools beginning in second or third grade."

While he was writing his article, an important study from Brandeis University was published that focused on the success of graduates of Jewish day schools in undergraduate university programs, compared to the graduates of other schools. The study revealed that graduates of Jewish day schools felt fully prepared for the workload in university. The study load was familiar to them because they were accustomed to a long school day. The homework load demanded of them in university was similar to, and even less than, the workload in high school, and they were better prepared than their peers who had not attended Jewish schools.

"Work ethic, skills, and perseverance - these are the three characteristics that distinguish Jewish schools from others," says Lorch.

Much research has been devoted to the effects of bilingualism, and they show the importance and great benefit of knowing languages at a high level already from a young age. Speakers of at least two languages possess advanced academic abilities, as expected, in learning languages, but also in other, unexpected areas, such as map reading. Apparently, bilingualism shapes the brain in such a way that it becomes able to learn in ways that monolinguals are unable to achieve.

Lorch explains: "In schools that teach Hebrew as a spoken language, and it becomes in effect a language on a par with the native language for the school community, it becomes something more significant. In schools that teach Hebrew Day School as an academic language, meaning literacy skills and the language of the Bible and prayers rather than as a living language - the impact is smaller. I would not predict the advantages of bilingualism from such schools, because it [bilingualism] doesn't exist there."

Don't Non-Jewish Schools Teach Second Languages, Such as French or Spanish?

"We need to understand that the timing is important. The fact that students start to learn a second language at a relatively young age has a great influence on the brain plasticity of the child."

The third element of the academic advantage is the method of study in Jewish subjects. "Jewish schools are engines of academic excellence," Lorch explains. "When students learn, in addition to spoken Hebrew as a second language, ancient Biblical Hebrew, with its unique syntax and vocabulary, this is comparable to an Israeli child who starts to learn Shakespeare in English at a very high level, beginning in second grade. At a certain stage, in fourth or fifth grade, another layer of studying Rashi and other commentaries is added. These commentaries are not in modern Hebrew, and also not in Biblical Hebrew. Again, there's a new layer of language that they experience. It's like teaching Shakespeare with commentaries, also in English, but from a few centuries later, which isn't the same as modern English."

What Else Do Students Gain from Studying Bible?

"They learn how to look at a brief passage from several angles at once, to try to understand this passage from every angle at the same time, whereby the first commentary is possible, and the second and third enrich the understanding. Here too, if we draw a parallel to studying poetry in university, it's like taking a word or two and analyzing them from several angles. Students in Jewish schools learned skills beginning at a very young age that will be required of them in their academic studies in the future."

Is the Study of Bible Commentary Different in Judaism from Other Religions?

"There are thousands of Jewish cases [of texts which Jewish commentators analyze and debate], unlike other religions, where such instances are rare. Matters of this kind are usually studied only in institutes of higher learning, but here, already from a young age, students are taught how to inquire and interpret in depth. Even if students in second grade, for example, aren't ready to engage independently in an in-depth investigation, their teachers are steeped in these investigations and are able to structure the value concepts in a way that draws from the tradition."

Advantages in Values Education

According to Dr. Lorch, another important benefit, in addition to the others, is values Jewish education
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"I discovered that, in the independent school world, one of the internal critiques that the schools themselves identify as a weakness is that, as a general rule, the shared values that they impart are very general, and it is hard to derive practical implications from them."

What Do You Mean?

"Let's take a striking example. We identified that they all advocate equality, fairness, and so on, but what is behind these commitments? What can the students say about this value? What happens when a school is struggling with a particular issue or dilemma? To what extent are they helped by a particular value? This was their self-critique: what does fairness mean? Does it mean that everyone is treated the same, or should each person receive what he or she needs, even if it's different from what others receive? What is fairness, after all?" Lorch asked these questions and came to the realization that, in non-Jewish education, even in a religious setting, schools lacked the tools to inquire deeply.

Do Jewish Schools Have the Tools to Grapple with These Questions?

"Yes," concludes Dr. Lorch unequivocally. "Jewish schools have a large number of sources, each of which delves into and analyzes the particular value, so that the value does not only remain at the level of slogans or general statements, but, in addition, provides specific, detailed guidance to the school."

Lorch refers to an important value that is frequently mentioned in Judaism - humility. "What is humility? In order to know, let's go to the Bible. In the Bible, we read about Moses, who was said to be the humblest person. Already there we find a reflection of this value. When we analyze his life and deeds, we learn more about this value. Already in the first layer of Jewish tradition we find details about this matter that don't exist elsewhere. There is an entire tradition of commentaries on these verses about Moses and other Biblical characters. To this can be added the many legal rulings on this matter that are, in effect, legal debates that developed around real cases that occurred. In the study of other religions, there is no parallel because there is no tradition of commentary and legal argumentation comparable to what we find in Judaism."

These three distinctive qualities, the communal-relational, the academic, and the values-based, are good enough reasons, according to Dr. Lorch, for parents to be aware of and take into consideration when they are making a decision about their child's schooling.

Once a Parent Has Chosen to Send a Child to a Jewish School and Discovers That There Are Many Such Schools, What Additional Tips Can You Give to Those Who Are Wavering?

"Being a customer in education demands a lot of self-confidence. When we buy something like a car or clothing, for the most part we know something about the merchandise, and if not, we know where to turn to find reviews and even to read in-depth analyses of the product in order to make the best purchase. In education, it's hard to see the product and very hard to differentiate among the manufacturers. Therefore, many parents try to find a substitute for a direct judgment of the quality of teaching and learning. The substitute is usually something visible: what does the school building look like, and not necessarily the curriculum? Parents find it hard to judge for themselves, and therefore they tend to check who else sends their children to the school: friends, famous people, wealthy people, etc. This comes from a lack of confidence."

After he identified the problem, Lorch comes to his suggestion. "Feel confident to make your own assessment of the atmosphere and culture of the school. You are more knowledgeable and able to do this than anyone else. You are experts in your child. Feel the atmosphere that is best for your child. Ask yourselves, is the atmosphere comfortable for you? Does it speak to you? Can you see yourselves fitting into the school community? Don't ask yourselves whether you want to aspire to this community, but rather is it the right fit for you now? If the community and the atmosphere are a good fit for a parent touring the school, that's the right school for that parent's child. Different schools are right for different parents, and therefore there's a variety of Jewish schools. You know what your child needs better than anyone else. Trust yourselves and your gut feeling. Just like the El-Al commercial: Feel at home."

Dr. Lorch speaks from experience. The reason he moved to Los Angeles to head Kadima Day School, after he had led well reputed schools in New York, is similar to parents' decision making. "I chose to move here and work at Kadima because I felt most at home here. It is a welcoming and warm school. I was impressed with all the people I met here: parents, faculty, and students. I encountered serious people, interesting and interested not just in their own needs but in the common good. This is not to be taken for granted; I haven't seen this in many other places."

Kadima Day School, which has been in existence for 49 years in the West Valley of Los Angeles, and which Dr. Lorch has been leading for the past year, won him over. In Kadima, Lorch and the faculty are working to create a community characterized by a mixture of tradition and innovation. This independent-community school that is growing from day to day is an institution of learning, inspiration, and growth which continues to produce many students whose academic ability demonstrably surpasses that of many of their peers whom they encounter in later life - academic excellence that propels them toward a future filled with opportunity, in accordance with the guiding principles of Dr. Lorch.

To know more about Jewish Day School VIsit:
https://www.kadimadayschool.org/